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# Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861

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# Review

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**Rothman, Joshua D.** *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861.* University of North Carolina Press, $19.95 ISBN 807854409

Mixed marriage

Work analyzes both legality and reality of interracial relationships

In this important work, historian Joshua Rothman asserts that we need to rethink conventional wisdom about sex across the color line in the antebellum South. Using a broad array of evidence from public and private sources, Rothman's is a community study, broadly defined, that focuses on the Commonwealth of Virginia and shows the myriad complexities and contradictions between the way interracial arrangements were supposed to have been and the way they really were. The social order of the antebellum South was predicated on white supremacy and domination of all non-white peoples. Southern law proscribed interracial marriage and outlawed fornication, both of which theoretically meant that whites and blacks could not enter into sexual unions, whether consensual or forced. Yet Rothman found ample evidence of interracial couplings that were known and permitted throughout the Commonwealth. He concludes that local contexts allowed for a flexibility and fluidity of a seemingly rigid racial social system, and so long as interracial liaisons fell within the boundaries of a community's standards, the local people were willing to tolerate the relationships.

Rothman begins his analysis of sex across the color line with an examination of the affair between Thomas Jefferson and his slave, Sally Hemings. He uses the writings of friends, neighbors, and visitors to show that many people knew of the relationship, including nearly every one of Jefferson's neighbors. Those who knew tacitly tolerated it in large part because many of them were engaging in similar activities themselves and in part because Jefferson was so discreet. The relationship briefly became a scandal because a political enemy, who had once

been a friend, brought the union to the public's attention. Still, Jefferson survived the disclosure, socially and politically. He did so, according to Rothman, by adhering to community standards and not commenting on it publicly. So long as Jefferson neither confirmed nor denied that the relationship existed, he breached no local norms and through his silence maintained communal forbearance.

Rothman also explores a long-term consensual relationship between a Jewish man and a free black woman in Charlottesville. David Isaacs and Nancy West carried on a forty-year relationship that produced seven children. The residents of Charlottesville apparently tolerated the union so long as Isaacs and West resided in separate households. Anti-Semitism seems not to have been a factor in David Isaacs' life, most likely because there were too few Jews to have posed a threat to the community. When Isaacs and West moved in together, Rothman notes that the couple began to encounter difficulties, most of it coming in the way of litigation from Isaacs' commercial competitors. Remarkably, law suits were the worst the interracial couple faced and the pair managed to have a relationship that should have for all intents and purposes been impossible in the antebellum South. Rothman states that this was so because the community was willing to tolerate the relationship.

Rothman moves on to discuss sex across the color line in the urban environment of Richmond, Virginia, the Commonwealth's largest city. Southerners expected blacks and whites to intermingle in an urban environment and understood that at least some of the intermingling would involve sex. City officials and members of the community tolerated interracial sexual liaisons in brothels, tippling houses, gaming dens, and the like so long as participants conducted their illicit activities on the fringes of town and out of sight of the townspeople. However, Richmond grew dramatically in the 1840s and 1850s and areas once inhabited by brothel owners and tavern keepers became incorporated into the commercial district, and concomitantly, the activities there became highly visible. City officials moved to eliminate what they suddenly alleged was the threat of open sexuality. Where officials had initially acted to control and contain illicit behaviors within a specific part of town, rapid growth impelled them to begin a campaign to rid the community of areas where activities of vice occurred. The community of Charlottesville was only willing to tolerate sex across the color line when it could pretend that it did not exist. Rothman uses this instance to point out that the hostile attitudes of whites toward sex across the color line had in fact and in deed begun before emancipation. While not disputing that emancipation exacerbated white antagonism toward blacks, he

shows that its origins predate the Civil War.

Interracial sexual liaisons not only occurred in urban areas, they were quite common on the plantation. White Southerners vehemently insisted that masters did not sexually abuse their slave women, but Rothman states that travel accounts and the presence of numerous mulatto children give truth to that lie. He notes that while white Southerners denounced abolitionists as interloping villains who wanted to mongrelize the white race, slave owners were busy producing mixed-race children with their female slaves, and then they sold their own children for profit. Southern white women suffered their husbands' dalliances, but the real animosity over the sexual violation of slave women was felt within the slave community. Violence begot violence, and Rothman relates several stories of black men and women taking matters into their own hands and killing their own or their loved ones' abusers. Community norms did not permit blacks, slave or free, to defend their honor against whites, though if they killed other blacks who had violated a loved one, they might be shown leniency.

In an analysis of divorce cases Rothman found that Virginia legislators and judges granted more decrees to men than women where the grounds of separation were adultery. That conclusion was to be expected and is no surprise, but what was truly startling was Rothman's finding that so many Southern white men were willing to forgive their wives' infidelities, even where the transgressions were with black men. He also found that interracial infidelity did not automatically result in the granting of a divorce.

The frequency of sex across the color line and the attendant offspring that resulted from such liaisons created difficulties for whites as they attempted to define race. Rothman found no less than 61 different ways to describe "black" in advertisements for runaway slaves. So confounded were Virginians over their own racial constructs that in 1833 the state legislature had to create the special racial category of "not a Negro." This designation, which came complete with a court-issued certificate, embraced persons who were of African ancestry but who had always "passed" as white. The certificate was important to those who held it because, while not entitling them to all the privileges of the white race, it granted them numerous protections that slaves and free blacks did not have such as the right not to be sold into slavery for debt. Rothman points out that the single most important factor in achieving the certificate was the community's willingness to accept the individual as a white person.

In **Notorious in the Neighborhood**, Rothman has made an important contribution to the recent spate of studies pertaining to sex across the color line. He demonstrates how blacks and whites negotiated, even manipulated, legal rules and social norms so they could engage in interracial relationships. So long as they complied with communal standards, those involved in sex across the color line were tolerated. Not all sex across the color line was consensual and Rothman may have said a bit more about that, but his focus is primarily on what communities would or would not permit regarding interracial relationships. What this fine book ultimately reveals is that the attitudes of white Southerners toward sex across the color line were flexible and often contradictory and that the sentiments were themselves not black and white regarding the issue.

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